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ABSTRACT

Writing courses in the graduate English education program at the State University College of New York at Brockport offer experienced teachers the chance to engage in the stages of the composing process followed by professional writers, discuss their writing with each other, and design writing activities for their students. The courses are based on the belief that everyone is capable of learning how to write and that the writers' workshop--in which all group members, including the instructor, write and respond to each other's writing--is central to the teaching and learning of writing. The Brockport courses, which have included courses in general composition and creative writing, have led to the discoveries that writing poetry and fiction is quite different from writing exposition and persuasion, that Kenneth Koch's methods are excellent for teaching poetry writing, and that teachers can develop guidelines useful for describing how beginning poets write and revise poems and how teachers can support students in poetry writing. A course in expository writing has recently been developed for the program, and a seminar dealing with recent theories of writing and teaching writing is contemplated. (GW)

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Writing and Teaching Writing: A College Program

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In "Notes for a Preface" to his collected works, Carl Sandburg wrote, "The inexplicable is all around us. So is the incomprehensible. So is the unintelligible."

But writing--and reading writing--helps us to explain the inexplicable and grasp the incomprehensible and even to make rational the unintelligible--which is what writing and teaching writing are all about.

I suspect I can't relate much that would be useful about writing programs in general, but I can tell you about a writing program at the State University College of New York at Brockport.

As a way of explaining how I got to where I now am with teaching writing, allow me to indulge myself with some personal history. Almost ten years ago I wrote the following in an editorial entitled, "My Writing Comes Pretty Hard--How about Yours?": "When somebody asks me, 'Why don't you teach your kids how to write?' I answer, 'My writing comes pretty hard. And so does that of my kids. How about yours?'"

And then I went on:

> The only approach to teaching writing which makes any sense to me has come from my pondering of what I did as I went through the complex, painful, time-consuming process of moving from a vaguely perceived feeling or conviction to a finished essay appearing in print.
>
> What dismayed me the most, I suppose, was the fact that almost all school or college teachers of writing that I had come in contact with and the textbooks that they were using were concerned basically with

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> talking about writing rather than with helping students go through the actual process which all professional writers--more or less--follow.

Now, in spite of all the hoopla over the last several years about the National Assessment's scrutiny of school children's writing, prewriting strategies, zero drafting, revising and editing, modes of discourse, sentence combining, and primary trait assessment, I haven't seen much going on in the teaching of writing to make me change my original position in any substantial way.

In this paper, I'd like to recount in an informal fashion how I developed courses in teaching writing in the Graduate English Education program at Brockport, which are aimed at engaging experienced teachers in writing--not talking about writing--outline what I believe to be the essential elements of a concentration in teaching writing for elementary language arts and secondary school English teachers, and close with some assumptions underlying my beliefs about writing and teaching writing.

Like most of you here, before I set up my first course in teaching writing, I had had the benefits--and the disadvantages--of a fairly solid background in academic writing. I learned to write what I believed to be marvelously argued critical essays--mainly by trial and error, with my trying to please professors and their pointing out my errors--I had written a descriptive, critical master's thesis on Henry Adams: the Search for Unity--dealing with the author of The Education and Mont Saint Michel and Chartres because my adviser decided I already knew too much about the subject for which I ached to write, William Faulkner--and I had produced an evidently successful

piece of writing in an overwhelmingly precious but unfortunately still extant genre, the docotral dissertation, reporting an experimental study in the classic format, in this case, A Study of the Effectiveness of a Linguistics Approach in Teaching Punctuation to Secondary School English Students. How long it took me to recover from the worst disease to afflict writers: dissertationitis!

But along the way, in between a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation, I had two related series of experiences, which forced me to question the traditional, academic way of teaching writing.

First, I worked with many, many adults and junior high and senior high school kids, trying to help them write academic informal, formal, and critical essays. Their honest problems in moving from ideas to finished pieces forced me to devise activities for leading them through the stages which I had learned I must follow when I wrote.

Second, I was lucky enough to be invited to join a writers' workshop, run by a writer of adolescent novels, Eleanore Jewett. At the meetings, we listened to Mrs. Jewett read drafts of chapters for her latest novel-in-progress, read out loud in turn what we had produced--poems, stories, or essays--learned to react to each others' writings, and then revised and sent out our pieces for publication when we were brave enough to face the slips which only confirmed our already deep-seated feelings of rejection. As a model of the successful writer, the genteel, white-haired woman was always before us. Not that she was ineffectual or naive. Far from it. She was a tough and seasoned writer, this lady who had to re-write her entire first novel because an editor said the children in it talked like young people out of something by

Louisa May Alcott instead of like kids from the twentieth century. What a happy time! And, I'm convinced, the only sensible way to go about writing and teaching writing.

As I write this, the words make clear to me the two major beliefs I have held beneath my consciousness about how people learn to write and where these beliefs come from.

Trying to teach writing to people of all ages and abilities has taught me that everybody--to some degree--can learn how to write. Of course, we can't teach talent, determination, or a fierce longing to explain in words the unintelligible wonders encountered every day. But, if we analyze the writing process--what effective writers do, what all of us do, as they produce polished pieces--we can identify and describe these stages through which writers move and the various skills they must sharpen to pass through these stages and then provide classroom opportunities for students themselves to progress confidently through the composing stages, all the while honing their individual writing skills.

And being a part of a writer's group taught me how central the idea of the writers' workshop is to the complex task of teaching and learning writing. Naturally, we can seldom provide a situation in which eight to ten highly motivated, well educated, mature individuals meet twice a month over coffee, sherry, and cookies to discuss each others' writing. But even though the external trappings of workshopping may vary, its essential features must remain constant. All members of the group need to write, especially the leader or teacher. All are obligated to respond to the writing presented,

not from a frame of mind which leads to attacking and critizing in order to "correct" what appears to be wrong, but by describing what they perceive so as to improve the writing. Each person must be dedicated to helping all to write honestly about matters which come forth from themselves. I would even go so far as to say that except for the first drafting stage--which indeed is a frightenly lonely time--all stages of the composing process should be--especially for beginning writers--interactive, that is, the members of the group need continually to react and provide feedback for each other about their writing.

At this time I realize how powerfully these two clusters of experiences affected me as several years ago I set up my first course on teaching writing, "The Teaching of Written Composition." Generally, I wanted the students, who were chiefly practicing teachers in elementary and secondary schools, to do the following:

--produce varied kinds of writing, such as formal, informal, persuasive, and critical essays, and poetry, and fiction.

--evaluate their writing as well as the writing of others, according to criteria developed by us cooperatively, and

--prepare activities for encouraging students in grades K-12 to write more effectively.

At that time, I used the Aristotelian categories of modes of discourse of exposition and persuasion--as writing to inform and persuade--and description and narration--as writing to please.

The teachers wrote, many for the first time since freshman college composition and for others, for the first time ever, they read their pieces

out loud in small groups of from four to five and later--as they realized no one was going to attack them or their writing--in the whole group of twenty-five or so, learned how to help each other with their writing, constructed writing lessons for their students, and arrived at systems for assessing and evaluating student writing.

I found out several important things about teaching writing from my experiences with that course. I discovered teachers could learn how to improve their own writing, could follow through the composing process, could create writing activities for their students, and could come to enjoy writing and teaching writing. (Blake, 1976a) And I found that after this beginning course in writing and teaching writing--following the model described here--these teachers changed their attitudes toward writing and writers. (Blake, 1976b)

But as I grew and learned and as the course changed as well, I found I wished to do more with the teaching of writing what we call "creative" writing--poetry, short stories, and drama--than I could with only the introductory course. So, planning with the Supervisor of English for the City Schools of Rochester, New York, I drew up a "Workshop in Creative Writing," which was offered at one of the city elementary schools for either college graduate or in-service school credit. These are the general activities I asked the students to perform:

--consider the differences in composing exposition from composing poetry, fiction, and drama, as related to the findings from right and left hand brain hemisphere research and from the testimony of professional writers.

--produce varied kinds of creative writing, namely poetry, short fiction, and drama.

--write classroom lessons in creative writing.

Although I planned to spend time with writing drama, during the two times I have held this workshop, we have spent almost the entire course with writing poetry and short fiction. In some significant ways, the workshop sessions in creative writing have been among the most pleasant and rewarding teaching experiences in my life. This quote from an introduction to A One-shot Journal of Creative Writing, a collection of student writing from one of the workshops, explains why this appears to be so:

> So after the experience at Twelve [School, where the workshop was held], we were even more separate than we had been originally, maybe because we had learned more about ourselves as human beings. But, I would like to think, at the same time, we had become part of a group, based upon such a simple thing as the respect for the willingness we all had to reveal something of ourselves in writing. (Blake, 1977)

From the workshops in creative writing, I learned much that was nonverbal and inexplicable, I had some of my original biases substantiated--such as that everyone can write, even poetry and fiction--but I eventually arrived at these three simple conclusions, which have since influenced my teaching of creative writing.

First, I learned that writing poetry and fiction is quite different from writing exposition and persuasion. Part of my conviction comes from the recent research done with left and right brain hemispheres. And the rest of my support comes from reports by poets and writers of fiction of how they "fed" their "muse" or personal "daemon," sustained their "irrational being," or called up their "subconscious." (Blake, 1978a)

Second, I learned to use a particularly fertile method of teaching people to write poetry, what that revolutionary teacher of poetic writing Kenneth Koch calls the "poetry idea." I further learned that all of us--elementary, secondary, or college teachers--could apply the Koch technique for compelling kids to write original and satisfying poetry. (Koch, 1973, 1977)

And third, I learned that by working cooperatively with school students, experienced elementary language arts, and high school English teachers, we could all arrive at guidelines useful for describing what beginning poets--which included all of us as we wrote poetry--did to create and revise poems and what we, as newly fledged poets, did to support our students when they wrote poetry. (Blake, 1978b)

Much as I enjoy teaching the "Workshop in Creative Writing," I now see a need for its counterpart in expository writing. Again, working with representatives from a public school system, this time the Greece, New York, Schools, I have developed a "Workshop in Expository Writing," to be offered this coming fall at one of the district's high schools. This is what I'm planning to have the students do in the workshop:

--improve their own expository writing skills by writing various kinds of exposition and by discussing their manuscripts in groups.

--consider successful practices and recent materials related to teaching expository writing.

--prepare expository writing activities for their students.

The final step, as I see it, in building a concentration in teaching writing is to offer a "Seminar in Teaching Writing," a course for those experienced teachers who wish to study the most recent theories of writing

and research about teaching writing. Activities should include:

--reading the most influential works and research dealing with the teaching of writing.

--conducting a study of teaching writing, preferably with the writing of school students.

--presenting the study for reactions and feedback from other class members, and

--writing a final paper reporting the study.

By way of summary, let me list some of the assumptions which form the foundation for the remarks made in this paper.

Assumptions about Writing and Teaching Writing

1. All people can learn how to write effectively if they are encouraged by a knowledgeable and sympathetic teacher, who himself or herself writes.
2. Writing is a complex, complicated process which nevertheless is accomplished by never equal parts of the intellect and the unconscious.
3. Teachers must themselves write regularly if they are to teach writing.
4. Students must learn by practicing--until the activity becomes intuitive and natural--the stages of the composing process.
5. Writing, like no other activity, is a special way of learning.
6. Writing, like no other activity, allows people to learn what they frequently didn't know about themselves.
7. The idea of the writing workshop, in which writers read out loud and discuss what they have written in a positive climate for growth, is at the heart of teaching and learning writing.

8. As a teacher, plan for writing but find it and take it where you can get it.

9. Essays, produced in a rational, logical manner, and poetry and fiction, springing from the irrational and unconscious, are two very different modes of written discourse and require different approaches for producing and teaching.

10. The teaching idea, first developed by Kenneth Koch, is a revolutionary way of engaging people in writing poetry.

As I look back over what I have written, it all looks rather academic, slight, and sparse. I haven't conveyed the excitement I find in classes on teaching writing. The joy the students express when they find they do indeed have something worthwhile to write about which others find amusing or moving. The confidence they achieve as they learn to control words in a conscious way for various audiences and messages. The sense of achievement they reveal as they move from haiku to concrete to free verse to descriptions of characters to scenes with dialogue to persuasive essays to formal and critical essays--and find, that, if they are not instantly professional writers, they are able to produce successfully these different kinds of writing. The respect--and intuitive understanding--they now have for what professional writers face as they create top notch prose or poetry. The sureness with which they design writing activities for their students. And the calm appreciation they have for each other as human beings, which has grown through the long hours of writing and talking about writing.

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